

## Book Reviews

### *Spina Bifida Discussed*

Proceedings of a Symposium on Spina Bifida. London, 1965. (Collection of papers. Illustrated. £2 2s.) London: Action for the Crippled Child. 1966.

During the last few years children with spina bifida have come into their own. It is about time, too, because in England and Wales alone some 2,500 infants with spina bifida are born every year. Looking after them is a complex affair; there is the spinal defect, the frequently associated hydrocephalus, the disorders of the urinary tract, and the extremely disabling paralysis of the lower limbs.

Small groups of workers in relatively few centres have applied themselves to the problem with immense enthusiasm, and it was therefore timely when about 40 of them met in 1965 to exchange ideas. The most interesting and still controversial topic is early closure. According to its originators, Robert Zachary and John Sharrard, very early intervention can avert paralysis by preventing desiccation and infection of the meningo-myelocoele and stretching of the nerve roots. If this is true, in fact the neural defect can

be aggravated by post-natal events, then the case for very early operation is established. Most cases of hydrocephalus are due to the Arnold Chiari malformation of the brain stem associated with meningo-myelocoele, and here again operation must be undertaken early; but not all the snags associated with the Holter valve have yet been eliminated. Care of the urinary tract has one aim, the prevention of infection. This is the great continuing threat to life, and as in all neurological disorders affecting the urinary tract constant vigilance is required; there is no once-and-for-all surgical or other remedy.

The attitude towards the paralysis of the legs—often aggravated by dislocation of the hips, deformity of the feet, and anaesthesia—is much less defeatist than it used to be, and it appears that as much care is now being taken with these children as was formerly lavished on those with poliomyelitis. This

symposium also included discussion of the aetiological factors and of the social and educational difficulties. Special schools, some of them residential, are essential.

The National Fund for Research into Poliomyelitis and Other Crippling Diseases has done well in sponsoring this and other symposia. The proceedings are so valuable that they deserve good presentation. It is lacking here; one has the impression that the various communications were thrown together without any editing. There is no list of contents, the pages are not numbered consecutively, there are spelling mistakes and some bad grammar, of which the following is the prize example: "in children that have died from renal disease and in who the brain has been decompressed for a long time, appear to have brains of normal weight..." Happily some of the papers, such as Smithells's on epidemiology, are models of clarity and felicity. If reports of future symposia have anything like the importance of this one they should be well set out.

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